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Taste as Feeling

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Ben Highmore

This article is premised on two presumptions. The first is, I think, uncontroversial, the second less so. The first presumption is that today, serious discussions about taste usually start out by rehearsing Pierre Bourdieu's contribution to our understanding of how taste preferences operate in society. This then is merely to recognise that when Bourdieu first published books such as *The Love of Art* (1969, written with Alain Darbel) and *Distinctions: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979) he was making a concerted intervention into debates about cultural value and challenging the philosophical understandings of taste based on such ideas as disinterested attention. Today Bourdieu is often the *starting point* for discussing taste, rather than invoked as a critical response to other starting points that might go by the name of Immanuel Kant, or David Hume, or Archibald Alison. The second, more contentious presumptions, is that Bourdieu was not actually interested in taste and rarely addressed its particular qualities in his work. Or to put it differently, Bourdieu was only interested in taste as a function of something else, and that something else was the generation and maintenance of social distinctions. This meant that tastes (particular choices, specific likings and dis-likings) were only ever relevant or worthy of note if they were *already* marked as having some sort of social distinction and value. It doesn't take long to notice that such an approach requires the discounting of all those aspects of taste that might matter to tasters but that can't be used to explain social differences: for instance, the way I much prefer strawberry jam to the raspberry variety, or why, out of all of John Coltrane's albums I am always particularly drawn to his 1961 album *Olé*. Nor does it address questions of taste that might not be accessible through Bourdieu's favoured method of the questionnaire; questions about overarching changes in taste that might mark one epoch from another, one national context from another. For Bourdieu, a taste that is shared by all would not be a taste at all.

These presumptions beg their own questions: how should we attend to taste if we want to apprehend the various modalities it can engender (indifference as much as vehemence)? How could we find an approach to taste that is flexible enough to apprehend what might be seen as micro-sensitivities (my liking for strawberry jam and the album *Olé*) as well as those macro-orchestrations that could include such phenomena as the ubiquitous taste for individualised technologies (from cars to smart phones) and the seemingly ubiquitous taste for "convenience"? Tastes, in other words, that might not best accessed by assessing their value as good or bad taste? And could such an approach (if it could be concocted) also apprehend what Freud called "the narcissism of minor differences," differences that were foundational for Bourdieu's questionnaires?¹ Could it register what it feels like to be suspended in particular taste habits that mark you out as posh or crass or something in between: the culture that is vividly described by the English artist Grayson Perry when he writes, "we learn the texture of our place in the world from the curlicue of a neck tattoo, the clank of a Le Creuset casserole dish, or the scent of a mouldering hunting print."²

Taste is often discussed as a force that drives and articulates identity. Accounts of taste might, for instance, put a good deal of emphasis on whether you like "wearing

silver instead of gold, or listening to Bach rather than Wagner or Pearl Jam rather than Elton John” because such choices “go to the core of who we are.”³ For some, at certain points in their life, allegiances to specific styles of music matter inordinately. At different times, under different circumstances, music tribalism might not matter at all. The “narcissism of minor differences” can obscure the more general manner in which we are sutured into the cultural logics of commodity culture, where we all partake in what might be considered ubiquitous tastes, hardly noticeable at all, apart from when you consider people who are excluded from the circulation of items now considered necessities (TVs, washing machines, vacuum cleaners, cars, and so on). If taste has been used as an optic for considering “status seeking” (and its inverse – “status shaming”), we should also consider treating taste as an optic for recognising how Jacques Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” and Lauren Berlant’s “historical sensorium” have been generated by epochal attunements to new materials and affective relations.⁴ This would mean treating taste as an agent that orchestrates sensibilities and that potentially alters our social environment (rather than simply reinforcing already established social relations) generating new liberating possibilities and new “coercive freedoms.”⁵

In this article my aim is modest: I want to lay the groundwork for seeing taste as an agent of sensorial change by treating it as a feeling, or range of feelings. I realise that such a claim veers perilously close to being tautological: one of the oldest meanings of taste was to “touch or feel.”⁶ Both “feel” and “taste” simultaneously have both a literal sense (the tactile and gustatory sense experience) and a more modern metaphorical extension, such that you can talk about fine feeling without any requirement to relate this to tactility, or describe someone as having refined taste in something clearly unrelated to gustatory flavour. Both words, though, can also be used in a way that pairs sensate experience with a sense of learning and accomplishment, as in “I’m getting a feel for sailing”, which could just as easily be expressed as “I’m getting a taste for sailing”, and which would mean developing skills and aptitudes through practice. Both taste and feeling orientate attractions, shape sensibilities, and recalibrate attention. These meanings, which still circulate alongside ideas about taste as judgement, connect to an older of sense of taste meaning to “test”, to “sample” and to “experience”. In treating taste as feeling, then, I’m insisting that it is useful to connect taste to experiential meanings, ones that aren’t hemmed-in by the need to evaluate taste in terms of whether it is considered good or bad, elite or popular, polite or uncouth, and so on (this doesn’t mean abandoning evaluative judgements, it means opening up the judgement of taste to a much larger range of evaluations that don’t stand or fall on a single value). To show the productivity of this conjoining of taste and feeling I’m going to move through a small number of scenes, to sketch a prolegomenon for reconsidering the role of taste as feeling within culture.

Feelings are Ordinary

The phrase “structures of feeling” was used by Raymond Williams from the early 1950s onwards as a way of naming an investigation into social and cultural change that took literature and drama as its primary sources of evidence. He probably started thinking about “feelings”, as an approach for practicing cultural history and criticism, in the mid-1940s when he returned to the University of Cambridge to take up his final year of undergraduate study after he was demobbed at the end of the war. In looking back at that moment in Cambridge in 1945 he wrote that there he “found the new alternative sub-culture, which in English but also in Anthropology was the group around F. R.

Leavis.”⁷ Cambridge English in the 1930s and 40s was dominated by the figure of Leavis and the journal he edited, *Scrutiny*.⁸ Within this context the word “feelings” is part of a lexicon of terms that wants to treat novels and poems as part of a world of experience. Thus, writing in 1932 in *New Bearings in English Poetry*, Leavis can describe T. S. Eliot’s poetry as writing “that expresses freely a modern sensibility, the ways of feeling, the modes of experience, of one fully alive in his own age.”⁹ Here “feelings”, “sensibility” and “experience” are either synonymous or cognate terms. For Leavis, one of the ways of valuing literature is to see it as a distillation of experience, and thereby a successful poem could be described as articulating “refined” (in a literal rather than a judgemental sense) feelings, precisely because the task that literature undertakes is to refine or distil experience.

It is part of a common understanding of Williams’ “structures of feeling” project that it combined Leavis’ approach to literature with an adherence to Marxism. It is tempting to see this “Left Leavisism”¹⁰ as establishing an equation whereby the word “feeling” drives the Leavis side of the equation, while “structures” points us to a Marxism that could be attentive to structuring activities such as the division of labour. My sense, though, is that the word “feeling” in the phrase points to a much more diverse set of concerns that were pertinent to both anthropology and the study of literature at this time (and within the limited milieu of Cambridge), and named phenomena that purposefully expanded the meaning that Leavis gave the term. This is not to say that Leavis wasn’t also informed by more anthropological discussions of feeling and experience; for instance, when, in the 1960s, he edited two anthologies made up of selections from *Scrutiny* he chose to begin the first volume with a long review by Q. D. Leavis (from 1943) of a biography of A. C. Haddon, the man who established anthropology at Cambridge early in the century.¹¹

“Cambridge English,” as it came to be known, might have been heavily associated with Leavis, but it was underwritten by the “practical criticism” established at Cambridge by I. A. Richards. For Richards “feeling” was a key term for analysing all utterances (alongside “sense”, “tone” and “intention”); it named the utterance’s attitude towards what it was referring to. For Richards “feeling” is “some special direction, bias, or accentuation of interest towards” the content and references of an utterance: it is that aspect of an utterance that demonstrates “some personal flavour or colouring of feeling; and we use language to *express* these feelings, this nuance of interest.”¹² “Nuance of interest” suggests that feelings name the particular shape that a desire or a demand may take: its strength (or weakness), its focus (or diffusion), its density (or delicacy). Just to show how extensive the range of phenomena that could be included as feeling, Richards explains that: “under ‘feeling’ I group for convenience the whole conative-affective aspects of life – emotions, emotional attitudes, the will, desire, pleasure-unpleasure, and the rest. ‘Feeling’ is shorthand for any or all of this.”¹³ The conative-affective aspect is that animated realm of life (all our volition, propulsion, attraction and repulsion) that is not governed by rationalised thought. It is, in other words, the world least available to being represented as ideas, arguments, and thoughtful reflection.

The realm of feeling, then, is an aspect of life that, within the reflexive world of intellectual writing, is often more gestured at than directly attended to. It is an aspect of life that Williams sometimes called the “lived,” an arena that he is constantly scrabbling around to find the right word for:

The lived is only another word, if you like, for experience: but we have to find a word for that level. For all that is not fully articulated, all that comes through disturbance, tension, blockage, emotional trouble seem to me precisely a source

of major changes in the relation between the signifier and the signified, whether in literary language or conventions.¹⁴

This is, in some regards, Williams extolling a form of vitalism that he sees as animating the living world of social communication and practice as well as literary forms. In choosing the term “feeling” over the word “experience” Williams is making a strategic move to avoid what he saw as the pitfalls of “these great blockbuster words like experience” which “can have very unfortunate effects over the rest of the argument.”¹⁵ The unfortunate effects included the privileging of particular subjectivities (whether these belong to the critic or the poet) who could be considered professional distillers of the “lived,” but also the way that “experience” often suggests phenomena that *had* occurred (and had been reflected on) rather than something that was on-going, and existing in pre-articulated state.

The term “feeling” would also have had a particular resonance within anthropology at Cambridge in the 1930s and 40s, and would, importantly, have signalled a specific ambition for anthropology. Anthropology was first established at Cambridge in 1908 in the wake of the university-backed anthropological expedition to Torres Straits, organised and directed by A. C. Haddon in 1898-9. This expedition is often understood as the first instance of intensive and wide-ranging anthropological fieldwork, a moment when the ethnographer left the colonial veranda, so to say, to go in search of “native” culture. What also characterised the Torres Straits expedition was the range of approaches it deployed: psychology, biology, physical anthropology, ethnography, geography, and so on. It became the basis for what at Cambridge became known as the intensive study. But by the 1930s Cambridge was not the centre of anthropological innovation in Britain. Often operating as a training college for colonial administrators the more innovative fieldwork was being conducted under the directorship of Malinowski at the London School of Economics, or by the social anthropologists at Oxford. It was precisely in this context that a younger generation of anthropological concerns were circulating in Cambridge.

One example can be seen in Gregory Bateson who was a central figure within anthropology at Cambridge in the 1930s. It was Bateson who was the main advocate in Britain of Ruth Benedict’s approach to anthropology with her insistence that anthropologists attend to the “emotional background of a culture,” or what she termed the “ethos” of a culture.¹⁶ For Benedict “feeling” was the pattern through which ordinary cultural activities could be understood as part of a general form of life. It is not hard to see why Benedict’s work would have such a powerful influence on Bateson: in the early 1930s Bateson saw his project as taking the overly-technical aspect of social anthropology into a broader approach to culture: “I was especially interested in studying what I called the ‘feel’ of culture, and I was bored with the conventional study of the more formal details.”¹⁷ It was precisely in an attempt to attend to the “feel” of culture that Bateson set off to New Guinea to study the Iatmul people for his 1936 book *Naven*, a book reliant on Benedict’s use of the term “ethos” which Bateson glosses as “the expression of a *culturally standardised system of organisation of the instincts and emotions of the individuals*”, which was to be distinguished from “eidos” which named structures of law, declared belief, kinship practices and so on.¹⁸ Such an approach to the study of culture takes us close to the concerns of “Cambridge English.” To get a sense of the feel of culture (to register the ethos of a culture, in other words) required ethnographers in the field to practice a form of practical criticism. They had to be able to attend to utterances and practices of an unfamiliar culture in a similar way to the way that Richards attended to a poem, by being attuned to the “sense, feeling, tone, and

intention” of the utterance: to develop an ear for a culture, so as to be able to recognise irony, jokes, teasing, self-deprecation, emotional force, as well as lightness, triviality, and so on. Such an anthropology was emphasising the practical in practical criticism.

But Benedict was not just an influential figure in Cambridge anthropology, her work was essential for the “structures of feeling” project that Williams had set himself. It is here that Williams’ so-called “left Leavisism” is better understood as the deployment of Benedict’s “patterns of culture” approach now directed at industrial, capitalist culture and its histories of structural inequalities (in this sense “patterns of feeling” might be another way of saying “structures of feeling”). Williams’ politics is not necessarily an addition to this approach, it is, rather, part of the reason for his attraction towards it. Benedict’s approach, for instance, led her to denouncing the configuration of US capitalism and its “emotional background,” as it is represented and explored in a book like *Middletown*, as fundamentally wasteful and inefficient (and thereby failing on its own terms).¹⁹ Williams’ debt to Benedict is profound; it is what allows him to write about “cultural form” as well as “structures of feeling.” And because it is so fundamental it often goes under-acknowledged by Williams. But in the early years her work is a constant reference: for instance in his discussion of how to analyse a world made up of “newspapers, magazines and best-seller fiction, advertisements and propaganda” as well as “broadcasting and the cinema; architecture and town planning” he characterises *Patterns of Culture* as a book “so distinguished that it cannot wisely be omitted from an essential reading list.”²⁰ For Williams an attention to cultural feelings takes Richards’ practical criticism into the living world of industrial capitalism through Benedict’s insistence on ethos. “Feelings” becomes a word that allows him to be sensitive and attentive to attitudes and attunements (practices of generosity, of neighbourliness, for instance) as well as to what could be called the energies of culture: the rising and falling quota of hope, of political fatigue, the amount of energy that can resource projects of collective action, and so on. And it is because of this sensitivity that “feeling” is a particularly useful word for attaching to “taste.”

Steedman’s Dream

What is taste? What sort of genre would frame it? Does taste belong to a naturalistic genre made up of actual shopping baskets and spent leisure time, where the “best” of intentions (“this year I will join a book club,” “no more ready-meals for me”) are often dashed on the rocks of ingrained routines, tiredness, and contingency? Or does taste belong to a more romantic genre, the kind where we are illuminated on our best side by the light of a consumer survey, for instance, that allows us to say “yes we like all kinds of music from rap to opera”? Or perhaps it belongs to a genre closer to fantasy fiction, or action and adventure? Perhaps taste eats away at us with frustrations and bitterness because our attractions and desires are fantastically out of line with the limitations of the life that has swept us along? Perhaps taste is the name we sometimes give to the lives we will never have lived. Perhaps, though, our taste finds a new incubating home in a community choir or a drawing class and this becomes the guiding light in a continually unfolding sensorial adventure? To treat taste as feeling means treating it as having different quantities of energy, different agencies in our lives, different orienting forces, and suggests that we will need to range across genres rather than be beholden to a single genre that wants to treat taste as a symbolic acquisition (for instance) within a repetitive serial drama. It might mean that at times we will need to heed Georges Bataille’s gothic challenge: “I defy any lover of painting to love a picture as much as a fetishist loves a shoe.”²¹

Treating taste as feeling might then require that we mobilise different kinds of evidence to address taste. In the mid-1980s the cultural studies writer Dick Hebdige wondered “what would it be like for a sociology that could consider dreams” as the material for attending to taste. In a passage that has the same heuristic ambition as Williams’ quotation about the register of the “lived” Hebdige writes:

If sociology is concerned with the discovery and examination of invisible, impalpable structures which cannot be directly apprehended in experience but which nonetheless condition everything that passes as *social* experience, then what can sociology do with the unconscious, what can it do with those invisible, impossible, imaginary structures we inhabit every night as we sleep? What kind of sociology would take dreams as “data”?²²

Hebdige doesn’t pursue the literal implications of a dream sociology, though there would have been examples of just such sociological projects that he could have examined.²³ Instead he looks at the physically manifest taste dreams that his male neighbors have established in the multi-ethnic street in London where he was living. These realized taste dreams often take the form of cars:

With the windows wound down and the bodywork gleaming, the street filled with the pulsing rhythms of reggae or (more commonly these days) the stuttering beat of rap, electro funk and jazz, the car serves as an assertion of the owner’s physical presence, of corporeal pleasure against the work ethic and as a provocation to the police who in my neighbourhood still insist on regarding cars driven by young black men as stolen property. Here – amongst the young single men, both black and white – the car can be used to perpetuate the fantasy of the male as a self-sufficient, possibly dangerous predator [...] out to get what’s his.²⁴

It is an area of taste that has also been pursued by Paul Gilroy in his essays on the role of the automobile in African-American culture as part of a repertoire of feelings where the automobile offers a particular form of freedom within a moral economy governed to a large extent by the logic of the commodity. For Gilroy, the automobile both offers and withholds freedom (for instance it “confiscates the possibility of collective experience, synchronised suffering, and acting in concert”) and rather than simply reflecting racialized and segregated social positions it “becomes the instrument of segregation and privatisation, not an aid to their overcoming.”²⁵ Their freedom is in this sense coercive. The taste for automobiles, then, is never simply symbolic of status, it is always entangled with historic feelings of freedom, mobility, and privacy that are shaped by the realities of gender, race and class, while also materially shaping these life-worlds.

But if Hebdige had wanted an example of how dreams could be used to pursue the social investigation of taste more literally there was an example very close at hand. Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* had been published the year before Hebdige’s article. Steedman’s book was an innovative attempt to explore gendered class experience as it was animated by feelings of envy, bitterness and longing, and how “taste” and its frustrations was the critical engine of these feelings. And its central piece of evidence was a dream. The dream in question is the author’s childhood dream about her mother. Steedman remembers dreaming of her mother when she was just a small child (three years old, to be precise), and it is a dream

dense with wish-fulfilments that are vying for space amongst feelings of guilt and anxiety. The central motif of the dream is a coat:

She [Steedman's mother] wore the New Look, a coat of beige gabardine which fell in two swaying, graceful pleats from her waist at the back (the swaying must have come from very high heels, but I didn't notice her shoes), a hat tipped forward from hair swept up at the back. She hurried, something jerky about her movements, a nervous, agitated walk, glancing round at me as she moved across the foreground. Several times she turned and came some way back towards me, admonishing, shaking her finger.²⁶

The dream is not Steedman's wish-fulfilment, or not straightforwardly. It is Steedman's mother who wanted, but couldn't afford, the New Look coat, with all its luxurious extravagance of swathes of fabric during a time when rationing was still in force (the New Look was a French design promoted in North American fashion journalism as the latest "must have" look).²⁷ The daughter wishes for her mother's satisfaction of her desire, while also sensing that such a satisfaction won't be satisfying. In the dream her mother has achieved her goal but she is still disappointed in her role and her small charge, still hurrying her along, still striving.

Steedman writes about class-consciousness, but her approach is explicitly framed by the question "what becomes of class-consciousness when it is seen as a structure of feeling"?²⁸ The shift from investigating the registration of class as a form of consciousness and cognition to exploring the way that class features in what Richards called the "conative-affective aspects of life" (with its "nuance of interest") allows Steedman to show how taste (the desire for particular forms of life) produce and reproduces particular patterns of feelings, and how it has particular political outcomes:

My mother's longing shaped my own childhood. From a Lancashire mill town and a working-class twenties childhood she came away wanting: fine clothes, glamour, money; to be what she wasn't. However that longing was produced in her distant childhood, what she actually wanted were real things, real entities, things she materially lacked, things that a culture and a social system withheld from her. The story she told was about this wanting, and it remained a resolutely social story. When the world didn't deliver the goods, she held the world to blame. In this way, the story she told was a form of political analysis, that allow a political interpretation to be made of her life.²⁹

The stories that Steedman's mother knew were the fairy stories where "a goose-girl can marry a king."³⁰ They were tales of class mobility that figured the female subject as socially fluid precisely through the mechanisms of taste (the female subject who can "look the part" through clothing and make-up, through deportment and manners – through a New Look coat).

The political outcome of this constellation of narrative genre, social and cultural form (the fashion industry, for instance), and taste-feelings was emphatic: "she became a working-class Conservative, the only political form that allowed her to reveal the politics of envy."³¹ But rather than treat this as a form of class misrecognition, Steedman instead offers the possibility that this envy has a gendered genesis and a critical potential. As Sianne Ngai suggests, envy has had a particularly gendered history in that it is used in "describing a *subject* who lacks, rather than the subject's affective *response* to a perceived inequality."³² It is as a critical feeling that envy can point to the

contradiction between the social promise that is entered into under the name of neoliberal capitalism and its ontologically unequal distribution of resources. Envy is the feeling produced in the cauldron of this contradiction: it is at once a critique of the narratives that promise so much, and evidence of the way that we can become deeply attached to the very promises that are so systematically broken. Envy, then, is a feeling attached to a taste: it is the shape that a taste takes, its colour and form.

In the light of Lauren Berlant's recent work it would seem clear that Steedman is describing a form of "cruel optimism," a situation where "people stay attached to conventional good-life fantasies – say of enduring reciprocity in couples, families, political systems, institutions, markets, and at work – when the evidence of their instability, fragility, and dear cost abounds."³³ Berlant's project is important as an example of an investigative method that pays particular attention not just to the objects of someone's attachment but to the very form that that attachment takes (its strength, tone and scale). It is no wonder that Berlant has also been attentive to Steedman's genre-transforming book. In her commentary on *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Berlant recognises how Steedman's mother's longing for a particular form of clothing can be read as a cathected projection of a range of social desires and demands:

She [Steedman] suggests that these conventions of the beautiful object [the New Look coat, for instance] convey a less-enunciated desire for a world that can sustain families, love, and dignity and that can overcome the economic strain and shame that working people experience in their effort to reach the plateau of satisfaction, the unanxious space and time of attainment that is the "good woman's" fantasy. Much of the work and the moving, monitoring, and accumulative fussing that go into survival as well as into the reconditioning of the social body are condensed in objects.³⁴

What Berlant seems to point to is a "fetishism-from-below", so to say, where objects are invested with magical properties to overcome the "strain and shame" of a lived actuality. Bundled into that coat are stories of another life, a "corrected" life, where the goose-girl did marry the king because she was a good woman.

The components of Steedman's mother's taste are a complex network of relationships held together by a fierce envy for an impossible object (the fantasised and missing coat). Between Steedman's mother and the missing coat are a tangle of threads that weave together a story that is regional (a journey from a Lancashire mill town to London), national (where the immediate post-war years in Britain witnessed intense privations of material goods through rationing), and international (where the United States, especially in magazines, featured as a land of plenty where everyone could partake in the billowing fashion of the New Look). It is a story built (quite literally) out of threads and regrets: if she were still living in Lancashire the necessary cloth for the coat (which is the rightful inheritance of generations of weavers) would have been available "at the side door of the mill"; if she hadn't had children, who knows which "king" she could marry, and how much cloth she could use for her coat? And, of course, it is a tale made out of the materialities of gender and class articulated via fashion. But it is not a general story about class and gender but one articulated through the singularities of feeling, and it is this set of feelings of envy and regret, that fashion a consciousness that feels the actuality of gender (a "good" woman) and class (where working-class aristocracy is not an oxymoron) not as a collectivity of shared interests but as a sea of hurt that you have to escape.

This register of taste-as-feeling requires an approach to taste that doesn't see a preference as *already* positioned within a hierarchy of symbolic value. It requires an approach to taste that recognises that the materiality of taste, as well as what matters about taste, is the feelings through which a taste is animated. In this way feeling, within the full conative-affective register suggested by I. A. Richards, is the vehicle for taste: it is the energy that orients us towards things; it is the modality of our attunement towards sensorial culture; and it is the shape and colour that our attachments make in the world. We can get much closer to an understanding of taste-as-feeling by looking at the work of Antoine Hennion.

Taste as Attachment, Taste as Orientation, Taste as Attunement

Writing in the wake of Bourdieu's critical sociology and in direct response to his legacy, the French sociologist Antoine Hennion forges a path that could be described under the banner "neither Kant, nor Bourdieu." Hennion's approach to taste is founded on two refusals: that taste is a "property of goods" and that taste "is it a competence of people." Instead, for Hennion, "taste is a way of building relationships, with things and with people."³⁵ Aligned with "Actor-Network Theory" and clearly inspired by the investigation of quotidian practices and poetics that Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard and Pierre Mayol undertook in the late 1970s, Hennion's approach to taste is a substantial challenge to the orthodoxy that sees taste primarily as the display of cultural capital.³⁶ For over thirty years he has been following the particularities of taste through work that is ethnographic, historical and theoretical. His privileged subject is the amateur (the one who loves) and while he has often focused on musical amateurs (non-professional musicians, concert-goers – the whole panoply of "music users" in Hennion's terms), he has also investigated wine tasters, amateurs in sport, and drug users.³⁷

Rather than offering an overview of Hennion's oeuvre I want to pick out three elements that characterise Hennion's sociology of taste; elements that offer a vivid contrast to the sociological practices of Bourdieu and his inheritors; elements that provide valuable materials for connecting to Williams, Benedict and Steedman, and for concocting an understanding of taste as feeling. To start with, and somewhat ironically, Hennion's sociology of taste starts out by "de-sociologizing" taste. This, like many of his positions, was the outcome of empirical work: "People are now so 'sociologized' that when you ask them what their musical tastes are, they will begin by apologizing: 'my family was very middle-class, I was taught by a private tutor, my sister played the violin...'"³⁸ He had to learn a way of talking to people (and a way of listening to them) so that they didn't simply provide the data that they thought he wanted to hear. To do this he reversed the authority by which sociology enters into a relationship with its informants. In the new relationship it is the informant who is the expert on the pragmatics of their taste, or as Hennion succinctly puts it "the explained becomes the explainer."³⁹ To do this required changes in practice: it meant that interviews became conversations, often soliloquys by the informants; it meant that these discussions often took place at a taste "site" (a room where music was listened to, for instance); and it meant working with much longer passages of verbatim conversation in essays and articles so that the weight of writing was often balanced towards the informants.

As part of this shift in authority, Hennion has developed an attention towards the *event* of taste: that is, instead of treating taste as an accomplishment or as something completed, he treats it as an activity, an action that is ongoing. In attending to the event of taste (or to the endless events of taste) Hennion's sociology is sensitized to taste as an activity that requires gestures, routines, instruments, techniques and so on. Some of

these requirements are elaborate techno-aesthetic instruments (a room with a hi-fi, some shelves with CDs and a sofa for lying on) but others are constituted by minor gestures. As an example of the latter he describes a dinner party where one person takes a drink of wine while continuing the conversation, but where another “stops an instant, takes two small sniffs, drinks again” before re-joining the conversation.⁴⁰ What makes this an event of taste is not the adjudication of a discernment (the display of an educated palate), but the self-reflexive “moment” of pausing whereby the taster experiences themselves tasting. For Hennion:

This moment marks itself by the surge of an intensified contact, provoking a shift between the self towards the object, and a shift of the object towards the self. What the minimal word “attention” expresses so lightly and so well – in a single movement, like the taster’s gesture – these two displacements which make contact, grant attention to, capture the attention of.⁴¹

It is this dual movement of the self, moving towards the object and the object, moving towards the self that marks the event of taste for the amateur, and is the overarching theme of Hennion’s investigations. He finds this dual movement again and again in the way an amateur rock climber is oriented towards the ropes and cleats that they are using, in the way a music enthusiast practices with an ensemble, and so on.

Lastly, Hennion’s work, is fundamentally historical. Unusually for work that is often primarily ethnographic, it is underwritten by a broad understanding of large historical shifts in cultural practices. Hennion’s historical inspiration is taken from art history, primarily from those art historians such Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall, who are inordinately attentive to the gestures, mediations, techniques, and exchanges that constitute the social act of painting.⁴² In this light it could be said that Hennion aims to register the “period ear” of listening as it is transformed over three centuries of music as a social practice.⁴³ So that when he claims that “it took over three hundred years of practices and inventions to create our way of loving music”⁴⁴ he has in mind a shift in the “period ear” from someone in the congregation “in a Protestant church in Leipzig, listening to the word of God embellished by a cantata which was intended, according to the rhetoric of the time, to ensure that worshippers understood the religious text, were swayed by its imagery and could memorize it more easily,” to a modern day music lover who can “buy the complete cantatas of Bach on CD at the local Virgin Megastore.”⁴⁵

This brief account of the characteristic elements of Hennion’s practice hopefully can shine some light on what Hennion means when he repeatedly claims that taste is “another declension of the word ‘attachment’.”⁴⁶ I think it is clear that he doesn’t mean just that we have a psychological attachment to those things that we hold dear (taste is not simply the repository of cathected investments). He is using the word much more pragmatically as a word that signifies the materiality of a meeting, a joining, a connecting to the world. In this way taste is the way we make contact with a sensorial world. And it names the way that the sensorial world unfurls towards us as we bend to meet it. Taste, for Hennion then, is a form of attachment because it is also a form of attunement (it is the work of repeated tastings) and a form of orientation (even if this orientation is just to pause for a few second to attend to the event of taste). In Hennion’s work “attachment” is a cognate for “attention” and for “feeling” in the broad conative-affective sense of the word. Feeling is the fundamental mode of our attachments: it designates the materiality of a curiosity in discovering (a feeling-out of the world) as well as the self-reflexivity of taste (to feel oneself feeling, which could be a primary

description of the amateur's sense of taste).⁴⁷ The feelings of taste might be the material practices of musical habits (for instance reading about new CD releases) and they might be the oceanic feeling of rapture when music "takes one out of oneself" in a transport of delight. Most often tastes are the layered complex feelings of multiple events that point to the unfinished work of our own world-making. In one moving account of "music using" a middle-aged man describes how growing up gay in the provinces led to him feeling "completely lousy, abject" and how joining a choir "transfigured" him:

I can't tell you how much enjoyment I got out of those sessions. Even now it's a very special moment in my life. Of course there were good looking guys (and ugly ones) but that wasn't it, I felt good that's all, I used my voice as a means to be with them.⁴⁸

In a few lines an informant reveals a world of feelings: of joy; of using his voice; of being with others. What is this feeling? Can we name it? What would Raymond Williams have called it as a feeling? I think he might have called it (as he did when he described his father's attachment to non-conformist chapels in Wales) a feeling for democracy. I think anyone who signs in a choir, who uses their voice "as a means to be with others", whether in community choir or in a church choir, knows that feeling.

Conclusion

I started this essay by claiming that the problem with surrendering an account of taste to the critical sociology of Bourdieu, and his inheritors, is that it fails to account for taste on either the micro-level of material practices (the tasting of taste, so to say) or at the macro-level of significant, often transnational, historical shifts in taste and in the conveyors of taste. The perspective that Bourdieu promotes is the middle-ground perspective where the relationships of figure (subjects) and ground (society) are already established, and where the figure has an already allocated place (is already representative of a class, an echelon). To wrestle taste away from this perspective could mean promoting viewpoints that are both "up-close and personal" as well as offering a more distanced historical perspective. Alongside this I believe that we need to examine the shapes that tastes take; the way that they are freighted with feeling; the way that they are carried on the backs of particular "ethoses" while simultaneously shaping them.

My taste for strawberry rather than raspberry jam, doesn't particularly matter to me; I wouldn't spit out a raspberry jam sandwich if I was offered one. On a conative-affective register it has a low intensity. John Coltrane's *Olé* matters to me more. Tastes like this aren't "finished": Coltrane's record is still working on me, unfurling itself, offering itself up as an explanation as to how a piece of music might constitute one long crescendo without getting any louder or faster. We are made and unmade as we attach ourselves to sensorial worlds. Both a variety of fruit jams as well as an endless supply of jazz albums are easily available to me. I live in a place and time of plenty (at least where jam and jazz are concerned). Across the road is a small supermarket offering a small selection of jams. A few doors down is an organic greengrocer where more expensive jams can be purchased. I'm lucky I have the money for either. A few generations ago my jam-oriented tastes would have been dependent on my preserving and jam-making skills. Similarly, today my taste for Coltrane can easily be addressed through the seemingly bottomless archives of online streaming services and YouTube. When I first listened to *Olé* my choices were limited: I had about twenty-five albums and a small mono Dansette record player – to buy a vinyl LP was not a matter to be

taken lightly. It wasn't a moment of material privation (no ration books for LPs), yet against today's superabundance the record's singularity, and the feelings it promoted, was partly dependent on its relative rarity.

To attend to taste as feeling is also to attend to the mechanisms of culture's dissemination; for instance, the circulation of US lifestyle magazines in Britain in the 1940s and 50s. These mediations are not some sort of supplement to the object of taste (the New Look), they are an intricate part of that world of taste. Similarly, the opportunities we have for declaring our taste feelings is also part of the ensemble of the social practice of cultural tastes. Today, for instance, I can signal my appreciation or lack of it at every moment of taste's unfolding: I can place emoji of small round faces, where red heart-shaped eyes pulse with love, or sad blue ones drip with tears; I can register my "thumbs up" in response to an amateur choir, a painting by a friend, or a cute cat video that is doing the rounds on social media.

In the world of taste, it is easy to get drawn to charismatic taste events (ecstatic concerts, delicious foods) and the intensity of feelings that taste and distaste can summon (moments of disgust, of envy, of regret). We need Steedman's mother's envious and regretful tastes to remind ourselves that the world of taste isn't simply orchestrated according to the loves of amateurs. But perhaps we also need to attend to other feelings that are concerned with less-intense flavours and feelings. And this is where I think it is worth going back to Raymond Williams and Ruth Benedict who often recognise much more work-a-day versions of feelings: the way culture subdues emotions, manages affects, and flattens feelings. Taste-as-feelings, share a family resemblance with the "attunements and atmospheres" that Heidegger sees as central to mood, to *Stimmung*. In Heidegger's writing on *Stimmung* (in 1929-30) he reminds us that the most important moods might well be the ones that we don't recognise as moods: "and precisely *those* attunements to which we pay no heed at all, the attunements we least observe, those attunements which attune us in such a way that we as though there is no attunement there at all, as though we were not attuned in any way at all – these attunements are the most powerful."⁴⁹ By insisting that mood and attunement are constitutional of our sense of being in the world, Heidegger makes it clear that there are no mood-less states.⁵⁰ Can we say the same thing about taste? Can we say that a taste-feeling circulates even when our preferences seem at their least emphatic, when we simply seem to be partaking in what might be considered a "period taste"? What are the surreptitious tastes that constitute the low-intensity world of taste? Is the taste for convenience just this kind of taste?

When Raymond Williams sought to provide an audit of the emergent "structures of feelings" of "Britain in the 1960s" in his 1961 book *The Long Revolution* he noted that "the real power of institutions" was "that they actively teach particular ways of feeling."⁵¹ We could also say that they teach taste-feelings: ways of attaching ourselves to sensorial worlds. The recent concern (if two decades can count as recent) within the human sciences over the "critical paranoia" that academic institutions seem to foster can be seen as a concern with the taste-feelings it teaches and promotes. My sense is that such concerns will continue to grow as we will all recognise that need to foster new taste-feelings that will require us to attune ourselves toward the world in less environmentally destructive ways. The fight for climate justice and for social justice will require deep changes in taste, and deep changes in how we feel towards the world and towards each other. Community choirs might seem like a trivial matter but in the fostering of democratic taste feelings they might well be significant.

My claim for this essay was that I wanted to "lay the groundwork for seeing taste as an agent in sensorial change by treating it as a feeling, or range of feelings." I

have brought together what I realise is an odd mix of writers that don't sit easily together, either tonally or in terms of their research practices. I think that one of the seductions of Bourdieu's approach to taste is that it has a certain aesthetic sensibility to it that generates a taste feeling. There is something aesthetically satisfying and seductive about the *symmetry* he produces between a world of cultural practices and social positions that he maps onto them. It is a complete picture. But that is its problem, its limitation. Here, on the other hand, I have sought to foster another kind of aesthetic form that I recognise is less complete and often courts asymmetry. In championing a gaze that treats tastes as simultaneously an endless series of micro-practices *and* an unfolding evolution of macro-practices I am also championing a practice that can move between and across the sensual description of a specific event of taste and the broad historical changes to our sensorial worlds.

¹ Freud's phrase is used in his 1930 essay *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *Penguin Freud Library Volume 12: Civilization, Society and Religion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 305.

² Grayson Perry, *The Vanity of Small Differences* (London: Hayward Publishing, 2013), 11. Perry's title deliberately mimes Freud's phrase, while also connecting it to the tradition of vanitas painting. The book is based around a series of tapestries by Perry, which offer a contemporary retelling of Hogarth's *Rake's Progress*, but played out as a story of "upward" social mobility in South East England, and the changing tastes (and their accoutrements) that mark the "ascent" (and subsequent downfall) of the protagonist.

³ Tony Bennett, Michael Emmison and John Frow, *Accounting for Tastes: Australian Everyday Cultures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8.

⁴ Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, translated by Gabriel Rockhill (London and New York: Continuum, 2004) and Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 3. This juxtaposition isn't meant to imply that Rancière and Berlant share the same project: they do both, however, provide an alternative critical optic than that supplied and pursued by Bourdieu.

⁵ "Coercive freedom" is the "feeling" phrase that Mimi Sheller and John Urry use to describe the mass take-up of the automobile, see "The City and the Car", *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 24, no. 4, (2000): 737-757.

⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1976), 313.

⁷ Raymond Williams, *What I Came to Say* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 11.

⁸ The classic account of *Scrutiny* is Francis Mulhern, *The Moment of "Scrutiny"* (London: New Left Books, 1979).

⁹ F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry: A Study of the Contemporary Situation*, second edition (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972), 61. This quotation is also cited by Stuart Middleton in his excellent discussion of the various uses of the term "experience" at this time: "The Concept of 'Experience' and the Making of the English Working Class, 1924-1963," *Modern Intellectual History*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2016): 179-208.

¹⁰ Terry Eagleton, "Resources for a Journey of Hope: The Significance of Raymond Williams," *New Left Review* 168 (1988): 7.

¹¹ Q. D. Leavis, "Academic Case-History," in *A Selection from Scrutiny: Volume 1*, compiled by F. R. Leavis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 1-7. Other evidence of Leavis' interest in anthropology and sociology could include his constant reference to (and promotion of) Robert and Helen

Lynd's *Middletown: A Study in Modern American Culture* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1929).

¹² I. A. Richards, *Practical Criticism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), 181. First published in 1929.

¹³ Richards, *Practical Criticism*, 181.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London: Verso, 1981), 168.

¹⁵ Williams, *Politics and Letters*, 168

¹⁶ Ruth Benedict, "Configurations of Culture in North America," *American Anthropologist*, vol. 34, no. 1, 1932: 7. This will also be central to her influential book *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1934).

¹⁷ Gregory Bateson, "Experiments in Thinking about Observed Ethnological Material," *Philosophy of Science*, 18, 1, 1941, reproduced in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 81.

¹⁸ Gregory Bateson, *Naven*, second edition (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1958), 118. The first edition was published in 1936. In a footnote on page 112 Bateson acknowledges his indebtedness to Ruth Benedict. In 1932 when Bateson was in New Guinea (with Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune) he read *Patterns of Culture* as a draft manuscript: see David Lipset, *Gregory Bateson: The Legacy of a Scientist* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 137.

¹⁹ Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 247, 273.

²⁰ Raymond Williams, "Books for Teaching 'Culture and Environment'", *The Use of English*, 1, 3 (1950): 134-40, reproduced in *Border Country: Raymond Williams in Adult Education*, edited by John McIlroy and Sallie Westwood (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1993), 174, 178.

²¹ Georges Bataille, "The Modern Spirit and the Play of Transpositions" (1930) translated by Krzysztof Fijalkowski and Michael Richardson, in *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, edited by Dawn Ades and Simon Baker (London: Hayward Gallery, 2006), 242.

²² Dick Hebdige, "The Impossible Object: Towards a Sociology of the Sublime", *New Formations*, 1, (1987): 48.

²³ See Helen Groth and Natalya Lusty, *Dreams and Modernity: A Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 2013).

²⁴ Hebdige, "The Impossible Object," 56.

²⁵ Paul Gilroy, *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 22.

²⁶ Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986), 28.

²⁷ For the cultural resonances of the New Look see chapter 1 of Karal Ann Marling, *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

²⁸ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 7.

²⁹ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 6.

³⁰ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 11.

³¹ Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman*, 7.

³² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 126.

³³ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 2. For a particularly useful account of how the “good life” might come to be embedded in everyday tastes (day to day routines and ordinary objects) see Jennifer Carlson and Kathleen Stewart, “The Legibilities of Mood Work,” *New Formations*, 82 (2014): 114-133.

³⁴ Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 237.

³⁵ Geneviève Teil and Antoine Hennion, “Discovering Quality or Performing Taste? A sociology of the amateur,” in, *Qualities of Food*, edited by Mark Harvey, Andrew McMeekin and Alan Warde (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 25.

³⁶ Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life. Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, translated by Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) – originally published in France in 1980.

³⁷ Hennion’s reputation outside France has been growing in recent years, and one result of this has been the recent translation of his 1991 doctoral thesis: Antoine Hennion, *The Passion for Music: A Sociology of Mediation*, translated by Margaret Rigaud and Peter Collier (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

³⁸ Antoine Hennion, “Music Lovers: Taste as Performance,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2001: 5. At another time he writes that the social consistency of taste appears only “in very specific conditions, when taste is at first the affirmation of an identity, the display of a social position – as, typically, when a person is facing a sociologist or filling out a survey form” - Antoine Hennion, “Those Things That Hold Us Together: Taste and Sociology,” *Cultural Sociology*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2007): 101.

³⁹ Antoine Hennion, “Pragmatics of Taste,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Culture*, edited by Mark D. Jacobs and Nancy Weiss Hanrahan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005): 134.

⁴⁰ Hennion, “Those Things That Hold Us Together”: 104.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁴² Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) and Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972)

⁴³ The coinage is taken from Baxandall’s study of the “period eye” of Fifteenth-Century Italian visual culture.

⁴⁴ Hennion, “Pragmatics of Taste,” 140.

⁴⁵ Hennion, “Music Lovers” 4. It is of course of note that the Virgin Megastore has mostly closed down as music lovers avail themselves of other services.

⁴⁶ Hennion, “Those Things That Hold Us Together”: 111.

⁴⁷ Or as Hennion writes it: “Through comparison, repetition and so on, things that are less inert than they appear are made more present. They must be made to appear in and through contact: to taste is to *make feel*, and to *make oneself feel*, and also, by the sensations of the body, exactly like the climber, to *feel oneself doing*.” *Ibid.*: 101.

⁴⁸ Hennion, “Music Lovers”: 7

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, translated by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995): 68.

⁵⁰ For the productivity of “mood” for investigating culture see two special issues: “In the Mood” *New Literary History*, vol. 43, no. 3, 2012 edited by Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman; and “Mood Work” *New Formations*, issue 82, 2014 edited by Ben Highmore and Jenny Bourne Taylor.

⁵¹ Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution* (London: Hogarth Press, 1992): 312.